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AUTHOR	Dei, George J. Sefa
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ABSTRACT

Findings of a 3-year study of the experiences of Black and African-Canadian students in the Ontario public school system are presented. The paper focuses on urban students in four schools and on their parents' perceptions of public schooling. Interviews were held with nearly 150 African Canadian students, including 22 dropouts, some of whom returned to school. Surveys were completed by 145 of these students. It is argued that a critical interrogation of individual narratives provides alternative and disturbing insights into how schooling and education in Euro-Canadian and American contexts function to engage some students, while disengaging others. African-centered schools are also discussed as an alternative educational strategy to address the fundamental concerns of student disengagement and underachievement in mainstream schools. Canadian schools need to be more inclusive and to be governed by principles that stress power sharing with all stakeholders in the educational system. (Contains 47 references.) (SLD)

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George J. Sefa Dei
OISE/University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario
Canada

(416) 923-6641, ext. 2513

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss some of the findings of a three-year study of Black/African Canadian students' experiences in the Ontario public school system. The paper focuses on students, as well as African-Canadian parents' narratives about public schooling. It begins with a review of the existing literature on students' disengagement and 'dropping out' of school. It is argued that a critical interrogation of individual narratives provides alternative and disturbing insights into how schooling and education in Euro-Canadian/American contexts function to engage some students, while disengaging others. In the conclusion, the paper touches on 'African-centred schools' as an alternative educational strategy to address the fundamental concerns of student disengagement and underachievement in mainstream schools.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, Black/African-Canadian parents, guardians, caregivers, community workers, students and educators continue to ask questions about the ability of public schools to equip Black youth[1] with the requisite tools and skills essential to their survival in a global community. It is generally acknowledged that one of the most crucial issues facing North American educational systems is the 'dropout problem' (see Conference Board of Canada, 1991; Cadieux 1991; King, et al., 1988). Dropout statistics are notoriously unreliable. But in Canada, currently, it is widely believed that at least 30 percent of students do not finish school and that at the present dropout level, as many as one million under-educated and untrained youth will have entered the Canadian labour market by the year 2000 (University Affairs, 1991:5, Statistics Canada, 1991, Youth Affairs Branch of Employment and Immigration, Canada, 1990).

In a 1991 high-school survey by one board of education in Toronto, it was revealed that African-Canadian youth were not achieving as well as other students in terms of credit accumulation. It was shown that 36% of Black students were 'at risk' of dropping out because of failure to accumulate sufficient credits to graduate within six years. This compared with 26% for Whites and 18% for Asians (see Yau, et al., 1993; Cheng, 1995). This survey also confirmed "...that 45% of Black high-school students were enrolled in Basic and General level[2], as compared to 28% of the entire student body placed in those two lower streams" (Cheng, 1995: 2; see also Cheng, et al., 1993; 15; Brown, et al., 1992: 13). In the most revealing statistics, the

board of education's study of high-school students who enrolled in 1897 showed that by 1991, 42% of Black students (compared to the overall student population of 33%) dropped out of school (see Brown, 1993: 5).

Many factors have been suggested as influencing dropout, ranging from streaming in the schools, poverty, Eurocentrism, white male privilege and structural discrimination (Ministry of Citizenship 1989; Pollard 1989). However, many of the analyses tend to over-generalize without delving into the specifics concerning various social groups in the educational system. Earlier efforts to understand the issue of school dropouts also concentrated on statistical tallies of dropout rates without in-depth analysis of students' perspectives as to why they stay or quit school. In fact, studies of school dropouts have generally been structural accounts that offer little insight into the actors' points of view (see Weis, **et al.,** 1989; Trueba, **et al.,** 1989; Karp 1988). Few studies have attempted to explore the issue of dropping out from the point of view of students themselves (see Fine 1991).

Within the Canadian context, Cummins (1989), Radwanski (1987), Hargreaves and Earl (1990), Lawton, **et al.,** (1988), Karp (1988), and Mackay and Myles (1989) have highlighted the specific problem of dropping out and underachievement among visible minority youth and looked at strategies for intervention. These studies agree that there are genuine problems in our educational system that need to be addressed for minority students. But while the authors provide recommendations for reforms in the schools, they fail to explore adequately the questions of class, gender, race/ethnicity, power and history in the discussion of dropping out, and particularly,

how students' lived experiences and social reality have contributed to compound the problems of minority education.

Since May of 1992, with the assistance of OISE graduate students, I have been eliciting the views and experiences of young people themselves and their parents, first, to see if there are other issues involved which the schools may not be aware of, and second, what the students' and parents' views are on those factors which have been identified. The students are from four schools in two large urban school boards in Ontario, as well as 'dropouts' identified through community groups.

We have solicited individual and group responses from students to such questions as, what do they like about school, what do they dislike, why do they think some students drop out and why do others stay on to complete their education. We have asked students how the dynamics of social difference (race/ethnicity, class, gender) affect their schooling experiences. We have also asked who is a favourite teacher for students, whether their parents help them in their school work and how, as well as the changes they want to see effected in the school system.

This paper provides some findings of the preliminary analysis of 'dropouts' and students' narratives of their experiences in the public school system. While these findings are by no means conclusive they provide early insights into the school dropout dilemma and also serve to inform the on-going debates about "African-centred schools' in a Canadian context.

Our current research points to the fact that much work needs to be done by way of re-theorizing and re-conceptualizing the whole phenomenon of 'school

dropouts'. Educational researchers have to move away from simplistic cause-effect models of behaviour in which correlation implies causation. We need instead a grounded theory, based on students' articulation of their lived experiences and a good conceptual analysis about how the diverse experiences of students inside and outside the school system contribute to dropping out (Lawton 1992; Dei 1992, 1995a).

While we focus on students' subjective lived experiences, we are also interested in the role that social structure and culture play in shaping those experiences. By analyzing the 'subjugated knowledge' (Foucault, 1980) and discourse of students, and highlighting the statements of the main actors, I believe we can be provided with alternative perspectives of the dropout phenomenon. In providing alternative explanations of how and why the school system produces 'dropouts,' it may be necessary to focus on the power asymmetries of relationships structured by race, ethnicity, class, and gender that Black youth and other minorities experience in the wider society.

It is important to ponder certain questions critically. For example, what is it about mainstream public schools that creates many disengaged students who fade out? Are there some school policies and practices and occurrences in the home that place minority students in particular 'at risk' of dropping out? Do the institutional forms and practices of public education systematically function to keep Black and low-income students from staying in school (Fine 1991: 156)?

Methodology

This study focuses on interviews with nearly 150 African-Canadian students. This figure is made up of 22 school 'dropouts' identified through our community ties and 25 students from various Toronto high schools whom we managed to access over the summer holidays. A few of the 'dropouts' have actually dropped back into schools. In September 1992, we began a series of student interviews with African-Canadian youths in the four selected Toronto schools. Within each high school, students were selected to provide a representation of male and female students from general and advanced level programs, and to include Grades 10 and 12 students.

The criteria for selecting Grade 10 students at 'high risk' of dropping out include below-average marks, poor attendance or inadequate accumulation of credits (see Ziegler 1989; Waterhouse 1990). Grade 12 students are providing information as to why they stayed in school and how the system has worked for them. In a few cases, the difficulty of getting students from these two grades has led us to include students from other grades (i.e., Grades 9 and II). But we have generally focused on the total credits accumulated as an important criterion in the grade selection of students. I have also conducted three focus-group interviews with Black male and female students considered 'at risk' of dropping out. One group was in a program run by a school board for 'at-risk' students, and the other two groups were from a job program operated for youths in the summer of 1992 by the provincial government. Focus-group interviews with students in the selected schools are still being conducted.

Group sessions have also been a way of cross-referencing individual student narratives.

Apart from these interviews with students, the project has also included an ethnography of the school (e.g., observations of school culture, work roles, gender roles, as well as student-peer and student-teacher interactions, and classroom activities). I have sat in classroom discussions, and hung around school compounds and hallways in order to observe the varied interactions that take place in the daily life of a school.

As pointed out elsewhere, Dei (1994), among the students and the actual 'dropouts' interviewed, 145 also completed a survey which sought firm responses to certain basic questions. Students and dropouts' responses were obtained prior to beginning the in-depth, individual interviews. Out of the 145 completed surveys, 80(55%) said they were born outside of Canada. Among them, 64(80%) were born in the Caribbean, 11(14%) in Africa, and 5(6%) elsewhere. Of the students born outside of Canada, 71(89%) came to the country after 1980. From the total 145 students surveyed, 97(67%) speak English only. Forty-three (33%) students speak additional languages. 65(45%) students took advanced level courses. The majority of the students and the 'dropouts' 93(64%), do not live at home with both parents. Among the students in the survey, the majority, ninety-five, said they knew someone who had dropped out of school. Finally, forty-seven students admitted they had considered leaving high school. The discussion of Black youth narratives about

dropping out will focus on the actual 'dropouts' and those students considered 'at risk' of dropping out.

Theoretical Approaches to Understanding 'School Dropouts':

Lawton (1992) has synthesized the various theoretical positions, models and frameworks explaining 'dropping out'. He points out that Finn's (1989) 'frustration-self-esteem' model views dropping out as a developmental process beginning in the earliest grades. The model argues that students who do not do well become frustrated early in school. With time, their frustration can result in a lower self-image, which eventually leads them to drop out. My critique of this model is that it does not adequately explain in the first place why some students do not do well in school. The notion of 'low self-esteem' could be used to blame the student and thereby mask the structural and institutional inequities and contradictions these students have to deal with that engender the phenomenon of dropping out. 'Self-esteem' may not be a useful concept for understanding school dropout because of the failure to acknowledge the individual self and cultural differences.

The 'Participation-Identification' model, explaining dropping out, (Finn, 1989) postulates that involvement in school activities usually results in identification and social attraction to a group. Conversely, the lack of participation results in a lack of identification. It is argued that the likelihood of a youth successfully completing high school is maximized if the student "....maintains multiple, expanding forms of participation in school-relevant activities" (Lawton 1992: 20). Marginalized students can become isolated from the mainstream student body. They may feel alienated from

the school system as a whole and consequently drop out (Finn, 1987, 1989). This model has some utility for understanding the impact of marginalization of racial and ethnic minorities in Eurocentric educational institutions. But it does not adequately address how and why visible minority students, for example, become marginalized. It does not account for why even those students who identify with the school system could still fade out because of the way external structural conditions are mediated within the school system.

The 'deviance theory' of dropping out (see LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991) argues that, by failing to support and respect the existing institutional norms, values, ethos and rules of the school, students stand the risk of being branded deviants. Consequently, these students may be denied privileges and rewards the institution accords to well-behaved students. With time, the 'deviants' internalize such institutional labels by redefining themselves in terms of their deviant behaviour. They drift towards behaviours that offer their own rewards rather than the institutional sanctions of the school. Students' oppositional behaviour acquires some legitimacy of its own. Because the school system would not tolerate such behaviour as frequent absenteeism, poor academic performance and truancy, their perpetrators are eventually 'pushed out' of school.

The deviance model is particularly relevant for steering attention to institutional structures and processes that rationalize school decisions to 'push out' students who are non-conformists. However, it does not problematize how 'deviance' is constructed in society. This is important if we are to make the connection between

the school and its policies and the wider social setting in accounting for school dropouts. This connection is essential for understanding the school experiences of black immigrant students. The policies of the school towards 'non-conformists' and those who act and look different from the mainstream are a reflection of the social forces of society. Society expects the school to legitimize certain hegemonic and ideological practices, while delegitimizing others.

Other theories explaining school dropout include those that hypothesize a link between structural strain on institutions and the behaviour and attitudes of their employees and clients. LeCompte and Dworkin's (1991) 'structural strain and alienation' model, which argues that if societal changes reduce the fit between school and society, then teachers and students are likely to perceive their efforts and participation as purposeless. The outcome of such a situation is burnout for teachers, and alienation and dropping out for students. The relevance of this model lies in the introduction of key concepts such as 'alienation', 'powerlessness', 'meaninglessness', 'normlessness', and 'isolation' to explain why students give up on school when their lived realities do not match the expectations society and schooling has promised (Lawton 1992: 21). Others studies such as Manski (1989), Stage (1989) and Bickel and Papagiannis (1988) have utilized economic models of cost-benefit analysis to try and explain the causes of dropping out. Stage (1989) and Bickel and Papagiannis (1988) focused on local economic conditions, arguing that high-school students will more likely stay in school and graduate if there is a good chance of gaining employment and improving their incomes with completed education. On the other

hand, if students feel local conditions make employment unlikely regardless of education level, then there is a good chance of students leaving school prematurely.

These theories provide additional insights into students' decisions to stay or leave school with references to the rational calculations students make when considering to stay in school **vis-à-vis** their social circumstances. There are students who leave school when they realize they could be better off economically doing something else. But even here, the narratives of the lived experiences of these students reveal the complex web of social structural, cultural and institutional factors that come into play.

For African-Canadian youth in an inner, multi-ethnic city, a grounded theory for understanding the etiology of dropping out builds upon the insights provided by earlier theoretical approaches. By analyzing the subjugated knowledges and discourses of students, and highlighting the statements of the main actors, we begin to uncover how social difference, based on such dynamics as race, ethnicity, socio-economic class and gender, restrict the educational and life opportunities of some students. We also learn how public schooling privileges and engages certain groups, whilst disengaging and disempowering others.

The African-Canadian student population is not a homogenous group and students' concerns vary to some extent. For example, Continental African students have concerns about the broad issues of language, religion, and culture. Students who have been schooled in the Caribbean complain about the "social labelling" of Black students as "trouble-makers." There are also complaints about the attempts

by schools to place them in English skills development (ESD) classes. Questions of identity are raised by students born here in Canada and, particularly, to mixed parents. Students who speak with distinctly different accents and dialects point to intragroup discrimination and prejudices among their peers. However, it is noted that certain themes and concerns do emerge from the analysis of the Black students' narrative discourses.

Understanding of 'Dropping Out' of School

We begin with African-Canadian students and parents' view of 'dropping out' of school. Marlo was a participant in a summer jobs program for students when interviewed. He indicated at the time that he was dropping out of school. He did not mince his words when he spoke about 'dropping out', and besides, was not a student one could claim of lacking self-esteem:

> "When I hear that (dropout), it just means the person couldn't cope with all the hassles that they're getting from school. The first thing that comes to mind is... yeah, that they couldn't cope with it -- couldn't handle it and said, forget it. And try something different... Yeah, that tells me, yeah, that's the end. They're not going back again, period... That's because they hate the school they're going to -- a lot of bull (I can say that?) shit. A lot of bullshit. To find somewhere where they can be comfortable. If they can't find it -- too much bullshit there -- they can find it somewhere else. Until they can find ... you know; somebody can get along with the people there. My school -- the first school I left was because of the reason of people -- the teachers and stuff that was going on was the reason I left. Too much bullshit." (08/06/92).

Steffan, 19, another participant in the summer job program also views 'dropouts' as:

> "Very brave and courageous. They decided to make a move to benefit themselves. It may not be the right move for me but they see it as the right move for them and they do it!.... Right now it's rough (at school).

> I can admit that. But in time we'll be able to appreciate everybody's needs." (13/08/92).

Generally, African-Canadian parents and community workers point out that it is easy for their children to drop out of school, given the way the system is set up to function. Amma, a parent, who has worked with a number of youth and other parents, is concerned about the youth who no longer see education as a tool to achieve their dreams or, as she says, "....kids who just don't feel like they have a place in the school system, or that it (school) speaks to their needs or their interests." She points out that education is "....not just about making the big grade, it's also making sure that they (youth) have the social skills to succeed. (Education).... is learning how to interact with other people, and building, learning, working with them to make them feel good about themselves...." Unfortunately, she thinks the youth today feel "there's somewhere else that you can go and be made to feel important and loved and special." She is concerned about the disengaging aspects of school and views 'dropouts' as youths who cannot translate their dreams into reality within the school. They are students who may be in school in body but who are really not there in spirit:

> "When I think about that person I think about someone who is just sort of, someone who is alienated, somebody who is disillusioned, somebody who is just frustrated, somebody who has just basically given up in believing that the school system can work for them or that it can make a difference....." (8/11/93).

For students who admit they have considered dropping out of school at one time or another, such revelations are usually followed by a recognition of the importance of staying in school. This is articulated in terms of a desire to learn, an awareness of the state of the labour market and the economy, parents' desire that

their children fare better in life, a need for some structure in their day, and an awareness of the need to succeed as Black/African Canadians. Students admit that, by dropping out, the student places himself or herself at a social disadvantage. However, criticism of the decision to drop out is muted by the knowledge of someone who actually dropped out of school.

Black students' narratives suggest that when the student is considering leaving school it is often the existence of one caring adult in his or her life that makes the difference. Students include in their reasons for considering leaving school, teacher disrespect, being turned off by a teacher, a sense of being overly-visible (i.e., targeted) for misconduct by school personnel, teacher inaccessibility for help, a depersonalized school environment, absence of adult encouragement and expectation that they will succeed, a sense of invisibility (that no one would notice or care if they dropped out anyway), teenage pregnancy, a need to help the family financially which places schooling as a lesser priority, pressure to succeed at home and a feeling of inadequacy in terms of school work.

Many times conditions at home compound student's problems. Elaine, a Grade 12 student, was born in Guyana. Today she lives on her own. Her parents have long been divorced and she explains that the last time she saw her father was when she was "little". She has an older brother who dropped out of high school. She points out that conditions particularly at home were ripe for her to be a 'dropout statistic'. She is still unsure how she managed to pull through the cracks. When she was growing up she lived with her mother "...for a while then got kicked out of the house," she

says. She situates her understanding of 'dropping out from school' in the context of the home experiences:

> "Well, I look at it this way, like, I'm in, like -- a year and a half, then out. I probably would have been one of those statistics that says so many people dropped out, because I'm on my own, and no support from family or anything, just myself. And, when, when I got kicked out from my house, the first thing that dawned upon me was 'how am I going to get to school?' I cried and I was like, I called my house and I don't know how I'm going to get to school, instead of worrying about where I'm going to live. So, I came to school the next day, I don't know how I managed to get here, and, umm, I got help.... But, I could have been one of those, somebody who's out there too, but I choose not to. You see, if I drop out I have nowhere to go. I mean, I look at it that way..... Like, it's.... the future's whatever I make of it, and, if I find if I dropped out, I would probably be somewhere I don't want to be, or I don't think I should be. That's the way I look at dropped out." (25/02/93).

The Economics of Schooling for African-Canadian Youth

Many students are reluctant to admit that they or their parents come from working-class family backgrounds. They do acknowledge, though, the impact that economic hardships have on schooling. Students feel the school environment 'favours' rich students and that rich and powerful parents had some influence at school. Not being wealthy makes many things inaccessible to students. But economic background and hardships do impact on students' motivation and school achievement in both negative and positive ways. Dorothy, a Grade 10 student discusses her personal economic hardships:

> "At least, I don't consider myself rich, I'm, I'm surviving, let's just put it that way, like right now I'm scrambling for money, believe me. I walk to school because I can't afford to have TTC bus tickets. Yeah. I do. And sometimes, I....amazing, I don't know how come I didn't fall down as yet, or faint I should say, because I don't have a well-balanced diet. Because, yesterday was perfect, I had night school yesterday, and all I

> had was cereal and I went to school. And that was like, an eight-hour day. Day school full-time, plus night school, and then went home and do homework and wake up and then come to school today. It's the same routine, and I didn't, I didn't fall as yet. I guess I'm strong, I don't know why." (6/12/92).

For Nisha, 17, an OAC student who is characterized as 'gifted' by the school system, the desire to improve upon home conditions can have a 'motivating' impact on the student:

> "Well.... even though sometimes I hate school and I don't want to go, I would say, "oh I'm going to drop out," but I'd never actually do it because of, I guess, the way my parents raised me. Like, I just think a person with an education is better, right, and I want to do something with my life. I want to get a good job and I want to make good money so I can get good things and go to nice places. I don't want to live on welfare in a rat-infested place with cockroaches, you know. Like I have better things for myself, and I think most of my friends do too. I want more than my parents have. I mean they have a lot but I want more... Yes, I mean, if they push you too hard you might get fed up, but I think you're more likely to work a bit harder, for yourself, not for them. Or even, so you can prove to them, that yes, you can actually do it, because I found myself doing that. Because I don't live at home, right, but I want to prove to my whole family that I can actually ... who cares if I don't live at home, right? I can actually go to school, get a good job and do something, right, instead of dropping out, getting pregnant and doing stuff like that, right?" (15/06/92).

Julian, 17, a Grades 10 and 11 student, struck me as a student who had done quite a bit of reading. But he also epitomizes the deep inner conflicts of African-Canadian students in the inner city coming to grips with economic hardships while still at school. I will always remember his powerful response to my question as to where he got his ideas from. He simply told me: "I live it."

> "Sometimes I think about leaving school, because really what's the point? You can go to college and get educated -- I know people like that -- and they don't have a job. So sometimes they just want to go and make money, you know, but... I don't think I'm serious about leaving

> school. Sometimes I say, yeah I'm going to quit school when I get pissed off at my teachers or something. But I don't think seriously about it... 'Cause all the time we're in school, we're not making any money. And just because you're in school it doesn't mean that you stop eating while you're going to school. So you know? If people were paid to go to school, a lot more people would be in school right now. Because they wouldn't have had to leave school to find a job so that they could take care of themselves and so on. A lot more people would still be in school, you know." (27/08/92).

Current harsh economic realities mean that students who find jobs want to hang on to them and continue to work while going to school. It is very apparent that, unless economic conditions change for the better, the problems of schooling are going to get worse for many of these youths. While it is possible that the current unfavourable economic climate may influence a few students to stay in school longer or drop back in, there are other students who find deplorable economic conditions as legitimate grounds to question the relevance of education.

African-Canadian parents talk about the expectations that children from disadvantaged and low socioeconomic backgrounds have to face in school, and the consequences for our understanding of student disadvantage. In Dena's case, she shows how economic factors are mediated in the school system:

> "I think that in a lot of cases you find students who are -- who do drop out, do come from poor neighbourhoods, but in speaking to a lot of these students and working with them, I find that they don't drop out because they feel that they have to go make money. They drop out in a lot of cases because of the prejudices that are associated to them because of their socio- or economic status. The administration, the school knows that they come from a poor background, whether it be from Metro Housing, and the expectation of these kids is generally lower, the attitude towards these kids by the teacher is one of negativity, and the students themselves know that, so you do find in a lot of cases in working with these students that they are the students who have a tendency to drop out more" (24/07/92).

Dealing with Low Teacher Expectations:

Students generally express the opinion that a small number of teachers exist in their school who make attending and learning worthwhile. The most favourite courses of these students tend to be the ones which are taught by these teachers. Clearly, if there is one area in which students show much emotion and anger when discussing unfavourable school experiences, it is the low expectations of some teachers about Black students' capabilities. Students explain such low teacher expectations as part of the deeply-held beliefs about people who are non-White. In interviews, students would cite particular teachers making fun of students and making students "... feel dumb". Low teacher expectations add to the bitterness that students feel about the negation and devaluing of their experiences, histories and knowledges, as well as the contributions they bring to the school:

Marlo introduces the issue of student relationship with a school teacher as the most unpleasant experience of his school life:

> "....being .... judged by a particular teacher... that was the most (unpleasant experience) .....I mean that I wasn't expecting that I mean you look up to your teachers they're supposed to be..... there for you and they're not supposed to judge you and I was judged by this particular teacher and it wasn't to say it wasn't done behind my back. It was done in front of my face and I wasn't expecting that so that was a big letdown to me - it was unpleasant." (08/06/92).

Jami was born in North America and has been in Canada since the late 1970s. She dropped out of high school and later dropped back in. Today she is attending university, and has a son in the public school system. In discussing the experiences that led her to drop out of school she critiques the conventional explanations of why

students drop out. She thinks there is more to the narrow interpretations offered in terms of 'boredom' and 'lack of motivation' because these explanations serve to locate the individual student as the 'problem.' She wants schools and teachers to be critical of their pedagogical practices and other school processes that feed on students' sense of alienation and disengagement from school. She calls for a deeper interrogation of the conventional explanations of students' disengagement as due to a lack of personal motivation.

> "Students, if they're not motivated, again it's not necessarily the fault of the student. Teachers have to accept some liability in that instance, so I think that has to be something they have to not be afraid to find out what it is. I see it in university too you know. So I think it's just a personal thing with teachers that the student's bored. They think, well, that's just that. You know they don't see that it could have something to do with them or the environment or anything you know. But any time that their (students') behaviour deviates from what they've known of them in the past should be an indication for concern" (19/05/92).

Robina, a divorced mother and university student, says she is concerned about the 'high dropout rate' among Black youth, and insists no single factor can explain students' disengagement from school. She is convinced that the reasons lie somewhere between "...the school, society and maybe ....the home." She questions attempts by some educators and school administrators to locate the 'dropout problem' strictly in the home when teachers know that the youth are in school for a greater part of the day than they are at home. She points to an apparent contradiction and paradox she sees in the attempts to blame the home for the problems that Black-African-Canadian students face at school. In response to how she sees the 'home' implicated in youth disengagement from school, Robina questions educators' refusal

to examine critically how their prejudices, conditioned by the structures of schooling, can have the effect of disengaging some students from school:

> "....I think when certain people are talking Black students dropping out and it's because of the home, they need to take a look within their own system, within their own institution that they're perpetuating on our own black youths before they blame the household.....You know, I see some households are religious, family-oriented people who send their children to school and as soon as they get to school, because of peer pressure, teachers' prejudice, students' prejudice and all kinds of other little things, they change. They're not the same anymore. Some of them, they're doing "A" student work, they're doing "A"s and they're not getting the marks they need....(18/11/93).

Like Jami, Robina thinks that schools do not push students hard enough and that some teachers unwittingly use the family background and socio-economic, cultural experiences of students to discourage them from achieving their life dreams. When this happens, students lose interest in school and opt out. In suggesting ways for the schools and parents to work together, Black parents insist that what is needed are new attempts at facilitating the social-structural context of the interactions of school-parent/guardian/caregivers. Black parents want the school to start from the strengths of parents and build up their confidence so that they can be 'involved.' Julie, a single parent, brings an interesting perspective to the on-going debates about the roles and responsibilities of parents in the education of their children. She argues that, instead of questioning Black parents' commitment in the education of their children, school administrators should devote their energies to listening to those who are speaking out on the problems of schooling, and the necessity for educational change. For example, she problematizes those who identify immigration as presenting challenges for the school system.

> "..... these same parents that everyone is criticizing and blaming were the parents who came here in the seventies and were fantastic citizens, of the kind who worked in the factories and their jobs and everything was fine and people didn't have any problem with them. So therefore, if they were people who were law-abiding citizens, working and everything was fine, why is it now that their kids are in school, everything is falling apart. Because most of the children who are having the problems are not the new immigrants within the school because we don't have that many coming in. Most of them were actually born here and they have been referred to as immigrant but they are not, they are Canadians. Therefore, the main fact that they are being referred to as immigrants is saying something right there." (08/11/93)

Racism, Sexism and Gender Bias at School

Students are generally reluctant to talk about racism and discrimination because they are sensitive to the accusation of 'having a chip on their shoulder'. They acknowledge some of the efforts schools are making to address systemic racism and discrimination. Nevertheless, students generally do not think much has been done so far and they are not confident their schools will ever be free of all forms of racial prejudice and discrimination. When asked about what they want to see changed about their schools, they point to discriminatory and sometimes racist practices of a few teachers and school staff and other colleagues (and sometimes discriminatory behaviour of students 'within their own group, intra-group racism). In fact, students often cite racist behaviour and attitudes as reasons for disliking particular teachers.

Nisha laments on what she sees as racial prejudice by some White teachers:

> "....lot of them (teachers) are and I mean you figure they're so well-educated they won't show it but it doesn't make a difference no matter how many degrees you have or whatever, it still shows and I mean the way they treat you the way they talk to you it's just different than how they talk to other students like White students and that....." (27/06/92).

Elaine, the Grade 12 student born in Guyana, also laces her discussion of low teacher expectations with instances of sexism at her school:

> "I think in our school...especially, where the other... where the field is more dominant in men, and when a woman goes in and tries to succeed, it's pretty hard. Because I, I experienced it (male teacher bias against female students) when I was in Grade 10 math, and there was -- I probably, if I recall correctly, I was probably the only Black girl in this math class, advanced. And, I used to always put up my hands to ask the teacher a question, because I don't think whatever he did was correct. And, I would have my hands up for like five minutes, and somebody else at the back of the room would have their hands for, like, [snaps fingers] just a minute or so, and it's a male, doesn't matter whether it's Black or White, but he would prefer going to that person." (25/02/93).

Deborah, the designated 'at-risk' student, also talks about sexism being "...subtle in the school system..." and that "not all students may be aware of it." She talks of one particular incident involving a fellow Black student:

> "Jokes towards women... well, I never got any. Well, I did get one and I thought it was really rude. And I just looked at him, I guess funny, because people say I have this look, [laughter] and when I give them the look, they mean, you shouldn't try it or something like that, and he said something to me. It was after school, and I was working on a presentation for physics, and he goes, 'Hey babe,' and he said something like 'I want to sex you,' and I was like...." (29/01/93).

Nisha, the gifted student, points out that there is sexism in the schools, most often directed against female students and particularly Black females, through name-calling and sexist jokes from their male peers. She also talks about the enormous pressure to live up to a macho image in which Black male youths find themselves. What these instances of prejudicial and discriminatory treatment on the basis of race and gender do is to further alienate students from the school system. They are also the sources of emotional and psychological conflicts and other health distress for

students. Unfortunately, these issues are hardly discussed in the discourse about race, gender and class discrimination in the schools.

Negotiating Self and Group Cultural Identities

African-Canadian students want their schools to reflect the communities in which they live. They are desirous to 'bring the school into the community' and vice versa, and are very frustrated because this is not happening. Added to these pressures and frustrations with the school system is the constant struggle of Black students to maintain their individual selves and group cultural identities. Sometimes their actions do come into conflict, not only with school authorities but even among their peers. Nisha's is a case in point. She cannot understand Black students who are prejudiced and make negative comments about other students, particularly their Black female friends. Her words reflect enormous pressures of discrimination that the young female student experiences, which could possibly lead to a student disengaging from the school. She focuses on an aspect of the myriad forms of racism, one which has to do with distancing between <u>self</u> and the <u>other</u>, and between <u>us</u> and <u>them</u>. This form of racism is influenced by the specificity of students' locations in the school. In response to a question about who her best friend is at school, she reveals some inner pain that perhaps some students think she may not be 'Black' enough:

> ....my best friend is Filipino actually but I used to have a whole bunch of Black friends but I just noticed a lot of my Black friends it's like I can't keep my Black female friends. I mean one minute they're my friend and the next minute they're all talking about me and everything so that's one thing about me. **(Int: What do they say about you?).....** well I found out because of Michael (boyfriend) .....he hangs around with the Black guys, and the Black guys and Black girls stick together. After I leave with my best friend after school, they all talk and he told me like

> they talk I used to have green contacts, oh you know and (long) black hair (or).....hate people who think they're White and ....try to have their contacts and everything..... and they used to write on my locker oh you green eyed so on and so on, or they might say oh she's showing off her hair it's in that you know or she's so cool you look good you know ha ha and stuff. So I had my hair back and then they say she thinks she's so sophisticated with her hair back... so it's really stupid." (27/06/92).

Students attribute the struggle to negotiate their individual self and group cultural identity to a very narrow school curriculum that, until very recently, least emphasized their cultural and ancestral backgrounds, and the contributions of peoples of African descent to Canadian society and world civilization. The month of February is set aside for activities marking the achievements of Black and African peoples in history. Students appreciate the chance to show and tell about their cultures and to express their identities as peoples of African descent. But there is also a wide acknowledgement that this is not enough and that for much of the time their existence is marginalized. Students define their marginalization in the context of both the formal curriculum and the unwritten code of acceptable behaviour and practices in the public school system.

The Absence of Black Teachers:

Every student interviewed wanted to see more Black teachers in the school system. But a few students are quick to add that having Black teachers would not necessarily make a major difference. In fact, these few talk about "....Black teachers who are not really Black" . These students engaged in essentializing what it means to be '...really Black'. The students feel it is important to have a teacher who has the interests of Black students at heart and who would encourage them to do well at

school. While many see the Black teacher as an important role model, a few speak about the likelihood of the teacher having a social perspective they can identify with.

Brenda, a Grade 12 student-activist, in the advanced program in one of the selected schools, carefully expands on the difference it makes to her if there is a Black teacher around:

> ".....I think if my teachers aren't Black I mean - I can even take it so far I've never had a Black teacher and I've been able to make it. But I think it would really help on perhaps not the educational level, because I'm sure that a person who is White or a person who is Black I mean they are both able to learn the same amount and teach the same amount to students and they can both teach very well or whatever. But I think just having someone who's Black up there who can share like some of my experiences with me...like a lot of White teachers I don't think would be able to share more personal things like you know oh if I have a trip, my family's from Guyana, so I went down to Guyana and you know came back and started talking about all the things that I did down there, I think a Black teacher would more understand than a White teacher depending on you know where the Black person is from also. So just, I think, little things like that. And also ... I have a tendency of developing good relationships with my teachers or at least a few of them anyway and so if I were able to develop a relationship like that with a Black teacher I mean myself wanting to become a teacher um I think it would be wonderful for me to do well. You know I'd be able to learn how hard or how easy it was for that person to become a teacher and the experiences that they went through maybe in terms of racism they had. Some instances occur and they'd be able to tell me how to deal with it and I'd be able to learn in that aspect. I think that would help me a lot...(05/02/93)

Discussions about the need for Black teachers usually lead to students expressing some desire for a 'Black school'. Not all students, of course, share this idea and some are actually vehemently opposed to it. However, some of the ambiguities in students' views on 'Black school' are very evident in their narratives. For example, those students who oppose the idea, rather than challenging the

academic merits, fall back on mainstream popular discourses in reading the efficacy of such a school, in terms of how the larger Canadian society would think of a Black-focused school. I would like to devote the final section of the paper to addressing this issue of some African-Canadian students 'wanting their own school'.

DISCUSSION

The examination of the narratives of African-Canadian students and parents clearly points to the need to address the inherent structural problems of public schooling in Canada. Many of these problems and issues of African-Canadian youth education have been identified in such works as Sium (1987), Brathwaite (1989), James (1990), Solomon (1992), Henry (1992, 1994), CABE (1992); BEWG (1994); Lewis (1992), and Little (1992). A critical interrogation of voices reveals that African-Canadian students and parents like everyone else want school that all students can identify with. This means we must intensify the struggle to make Canadian schools more 'inclusive' and be governed by a set of principles that stress power-sharing with all stakeholders in the educational system. Canadian schools must speak to, and act on, the diversity of experiences, histories and knowledges that have shaped, and continue to shape, human growth and development. Students link their personal and group identities to schooling in complex ways. But the continuing educational crisis for African-Canadian youth demands that alternative and additional strategies be pursued to bring academic and social success for the youth. While mainstream schools strive to be more inclusive, additional action on several fronts can be embarked upon to tackle the problem of educational underachievement. Elsewhere,

(Dei, 1995b) I have discussed the idea of 'Black-focused/African-centred' schools in a Canadian context, as originally proposed by the Working Group (1992). The Royal Commission on Learning's (RCOL) recent report on Ontario education gave some added dimensions to the idea when it suggested that "....in jurisdictions with large numbers of black students, school boards, academic authorities, faculties of education, and representatives of the black community collaborate to establish demonstration schools and innovative programs, based on practices in bringing about academic success for black students (RCOL, 1994).

The marginality felt by some African-Canadian students in the mainstream schools cannot be lost on the astute, critical educational researcher. There are students who are completely 'tuned out' of school. They are there in body and not in spirit or soul. While an approach to 'inclusive schooling' can assist these youths, I also believe that the idea of alternative focused schools should be a valid option. This is not a contradiction at all. We should interpret the existence and success of Black-focused/African-centred schools as a challenge to mainstream schools to live up to the ideals of genuine inclusion. While all steps are purportedly being taken to make our schools inclusive, African-centred schools can be instituted for those parents who wish to send their children to these schools and those students who wish to go to such schools. The success of African-centred schools will bring an added pressure on the current school system to respond to the needs and concerns of a diverse student body. This is because most parents want their children to stay in inclusive schools.

The argument that having African-centred schools simply means going back to the days of segregation deserves further interrogation than this paper will permit. Segregation is more than physical space and location. The act of segregating a group always emerges from institutional and ideological aims. The institutional and ideological aims of those segregationists of the first half of this century were certainly meant to exclude others. These aims must be distinguished from the needs of those who wish their children to be schooled in an environment free of bias in the 1990s. This distinction between forced segregation and segregation by choice (if indeed this is segregation at all) should mean something. Indeed, we live in a complex world and we should always be looking for multiple solutions to problems and concerns.

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NOTES

1. In this paper I use the terms 'Black' and 'African-Canadian' interchangeably to refer to Canadians of African descent and who also describe themselves as such.

2. Until this year, the Ontario public school system placed students entering Grade 9 into three different course levels, based on ability: the **basic or vocational** level, the **general** four-year level, and the **advanced** level, which includes courses leading to university entrance. This is a process referred to as 'streaming.' In September, 1993, the provincial government destreamed Grade 9 classes as part of the reform measures intended to address the school dropout rate.

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